

An Evolution in Sports



BILLIARDS IN THE TIME OF LOUIS XV



BY CHARLES E. CAKE

Sports! A word badly misused, though sanctioned by the leading moralists of all times. It came into being no doubt because of the instinct of man to contest, to combat, another. Yet there was also a certain playfulness about it—to enter into a spirit of pure fun. But sports have come tip-toeing through the centuries, attaining great supremacy here and descending to low depths there, until widening over a circle as big as the earth itself.

All peoples demanded sports. It mattered little the form, so there was the indulgence in a pastime—a moment when energies must have full swing, whether in rivalry or in mere play.

Emperor Augustus, in looking out from his palace upon the great Circus Maximus, holding over 300,000 people, saw the pent-up forces of the Roman empire indulging a diversion. The Coliseum, not far from the circus, witnessed another form of pastime—a real combative contest—the gladiators struggling for the upper hand. Even in time of war, the Romans regarded as great fun the famous catapult, which only manifested another way of directing certain energies. The Trojan horse, while supposed to aid the soldiers to enter the gates of Troy and thus spring a snip, was purely a sport, even if historians term it allegorical.

The bull fights, while brutal and inhuman, and therefore condemned by most people, still are acclaimed in Spain and Mexico; a peculiar sport, indeed, but the kind the people of those countries enjoy.

Soon there will be assembled in Stockholm, in the great Stadium, representatives of all countries, men who will participate in nearly every conceivable sport known to modern civilization.

They are all sports. Those of early history were no less so than those of the present time. They are sports because humanity must express itself in some form, and this expression of itself follows the most natural lines; when it fails to, the sport declines quickly; the former representing the continuity of cleavage; the latter representing the sporadic burst of the moment.

There is another virtue element in the human makeup. While this form has the added virtue of bringing both sexes in closer union, without the exercise of anything greater than ordinary power, still it must be classed as a sport.

Thus, there are the games of "post-office," "kissing bees" and of "all hands around," probably typifying, in western civilization at least, a diversion more far reaching and more effective than chariot races or gladiatorial contests, if definite connections of sexes are an index.

This casual review tells in a word how men have got away from the daily care, demanding responsibility and freedom, and thrown themselves into the whirl of relaxation.

But diversion is not always for the out-of-doors. Truly, men love to see "two dears," one on third, and a clean single to the field, giving the run necessary to win; or "with ten yards to go" push the piston over for the necessary touchdowns; or, furthermore, see a skit jumper leap 100 feet in the air and clear the best mark made. All this lifts a Saturday afternoon crowd to its feet amid deafening din. Still, all cannot get out of doors or do not wish to.

Then what? To another diversion, and this brings to mind the most scientific of sports—the game of billiards; and scientific for the reason that greater brain power and mental poise are required than in any other pastime which yields an equal amount of physical diversion.

Billiards is not of recent creation. It has not come up along with other modern sports. In truth, it began its existence about the time the charioteers were driving four abreast or when Hannibal was huing his way over the Alps from Carthage in a vain attempt to dislodge Scipio and wrest the crown from the imperial Romans.

The authority is Shakespeare, and who doubts this sage? But the great bard refers more especially to the time of Marc Antony, which, of course, does not remove it from Roman activity of the same period.

But billiards then and billiards now are, manifestly, two varying kinds of sport. What precise form it took in early history is not clear, save that there was some flat surface about which balls were knocked, clearly indicating the diversion's proclivity; confined, no doubt, to those of less muscular power.

There was no hurrah about the game at so early a date. There was nothing to excite the populace, or to draw the lance in retaliation of an offense. It was much after the game of present day quoits, or horseshoe throwing, in its quiet and gentle manifestations.

Still it continued a sport. On up through history it found claim among the Normans, among the French, which

had given it a great impetus. Mary, Queen of Scots, delighted in the pastime, which was denied her as an early form of punishment. The Henry kings and the French potentates indulged it freely.

America saw it among the Huguenots in South Carolina and the Hollanders, the proprietors of the Kuickerboekers, on Manhattan Island.

Washington, Jefferson, Hamilton and La Fayette played it with zest at a time when billiards was the sole diversion from Puritanic laws.

This was the game of billiards in the beginning; and the only stigma that may be cast upon it was that, unlike, and probably in opposition to, the plebeians, the aristocracy took to it and made it worth while. It is quite easy, therefore, to draw an invisible line between those who took to the arena for the commoner sports and those who preferred the drawn portieres of the palaces for theirs. But both, in the same inevitableness, worked toward a common point—the relaxation of muscle and nerve with as definite a broadening of the mind as possible.

But no game of sports ever has remained aristocratic, even though nurtured by wealth and power. The reason for this is precise; since what is good for one individual is surely good for another. Golf, which undoubtedly was originally a rich man's diversion, is played today by all classes on the public links of the large cities. Tennis, which started in a vacant space next to a mansion or well-to-do home, spread rapidly and became a common pastime for all peoples. Conversely, base ball, that began as "two-o'-cat" on a scrub half a century ago, and disdained by affluence, is witnessed today by tens of thousands of the upper classes who score it with punctuality and exactness; and revel in recalling an exciting play in a tense moment.

Human forces are alike among all nations. The only doubt that enters into their calculations is as to practicability. What may be converted into use may be regarded as largely permanent, or until such time as the sport undergoes a change made necessary by conditions.

Billiards is not different. Naturally, therefore, the human mind should conceive that simply a flat surface were not enough—there must be regulations that permit of more versatility and more science. This came about through the application of thought.

If a table had one hole in it, into which balls were knocked, why should it not have six holes? If the cue in the early stages was crooked at one end, why should it not be straight, if experience indicated that greater exactness in execution resulted? And why an overly large surface, when a reduced plane were enough?

History is probably full of sports that failed. Many a form of entertainment has come up rapidly only to pass away as quickly. Attempts have been made, no doubt, to revive them, but with no success.

The reason is clear. The sport did not meet any human need. Or, if it did, it was so misused that confidence never has been restored.

The fact, therefore, that the game of billiards has survived and grown to such tremendous proportions, establishes positively that it has more than met a human need. The complement of billiards—pocket billiards, or what was formerly called pool, where the balls are driven into pockets—has kept pace with it.

It is the only sport with a real history that has survived. Chariot races are seen no more outside of the American circus and then in such a small way as to convey little idea of what they

BILLIARDS IN THE TIME OF WASHINGTON



were in the time of the Romans. Gladiatorial contests, if attempted now, would excite the public conscience to a state of utter riot. The Marathon race, or the long distance running race, a survival in part of early times, is even passing out of favor, though conducted on vastly more humane lines than the original races. The last one run at the Olympic games in London, when a contestant was doped and dragged over the finish line, is still a sickening reminder of its failure as a sport.

But the game of billiards has had no easy path to its present position as a pastime. Soon after its firm establishment in the United States, or its wide indulgence by the American people in the early '70s, onslaughts were made upon it with telling results.

Following the previously stated line of reasoning, all classes took to billiards and pocket billiards. It was a fashion to have a pocket table in the rear of a saloon, as an antidote to too much drinking or as a stimulant to drinking. It seemed to work both ways. It thus became one of those easily convertible agencies, depending on the whim or purpose of the proprietor.

Naturally, when the players were at play and partaking of drink, one would place a bet on the outcome of the game. There was no prohibition against it. The result was to contaminate it and to spread the information that this young man and that was being ruined in so and so's billiard hall, even when the gambling or drinking was greatly over-estimated.

But it meant a crusade that lived long. Every religious or social organization in the neighborhood took up the cry and conditions were changed, as they should have been. There are places still that are not free from this influence, but the number has been reduced by fully 75 per cent.

It would seem in consequence that other baneful influences would spring up. But not so. Quite the contrary. Where there was one saloon with one or more tables, in a radius of two blocks or more, there are now two and more billiard halls, conducted strictly as billiard halls, and affording diversion both to the young and to the old in the evening after the day's work is done.

This applies particularly to the cities where the forms of diversion are not so many as people think. And in the small towns, those ranging in population from 2,500 to 10,000, a person could not fifteen years ago suggest a billiard or pocket billiard hall without receiving the instant condemnation of the local authorities, but today there are many splendidly appointed and conducted halls that are run without question.

A pertinent illustration is afforded that shows how people may come to change their minds about a sport. A small town in Missouri, noted for its zinc mines, refused to allow billiard halls, putting the license fee so high as to make it prohibitive. But there was a certain class of men, two bankers, one prominent lawyer and one business man, who had a hobby for foot races. They loved nothing better than to see a foot race and they were willing to gamble on the outcome.

This fact was communicated to a professional foot racer, who, with two confederates, one to be his opponent, swept down upon this horde of hungry parasites one day and proposed a race, the contestants by design never having seen one another before. The "prominent men" bit heavily at the bait. Large sums were put up; the race was run and the "prominent men" were stung, losing all told \$5,000.

The Survival of Billiards Among Early Sports: Its Gradual Adaptation as a Pastime by all Countries: Its Universal Acceptance Today as a Health Building Diversion.

pocket billiard table, the room well lighted, cleanly kept, and conducted in entire conformity to local laws.

In addition to the pastime feature is another, the product of modern ideas of health building. And it seems strange that this feature has application to more than 50 per cent. of people who seek diversion, whereas it might be figured that other sports would come in for a certain share. That feature is the tonic property of the game—lessening the strain on brain caused by overwork; relieving tense nerves, for the same reason, and making more supple the muscles that have grown flabby through disuse.

The educational feature is of no less importance. For the game of billiards cannot be played with the eyes shut and the mind closed. The exactness of its scientific qualities calls forth every brain faculty the player possesses—making sure that this or that conception of a shot is correct by the faithfulness of the execution. A mind becoming stale from drudgery or fatigues immediately responds to this other in-

fluence, and the relief is even greater than that occasioned by sleep.

Sir Astley Cooper, of England, said: "We should all sleep more soundly if we made it a rule to play billiards an hour or two each evening before going to bed."

Henry Ward Beecher endorsed it for similar reasons and for its moral stimulus.

And the moral status of billiards has largely determined its fixed position in the world's pastimes. There can be no pommeling of body because of the method of play; there is no use for vile and abusive language, because one fails to make his points; there is no association with corrupting influences and consequently no object of attack, because of its simple style in play—and who shall say that it does not promote a clean atmosphere and respectable environment?

The absence of these things makes for character building, and any sport is dependent on character for lasting effect. Man will not tolerate the opposite of this, and a give in the sharp line drawn between these two points is merely a test of the strength of the points themselves. The fact that they still stand disqualifies the test.

The United States is responsible for the attainment in the games of billiards and pocket billiards, and that attainment has been accomplished in a third of a century. Other nations have influenced them, protected them from harmful invasions, but it remained for the great government of democracy to place these games within the reach of all classes and to stimulate those classes to an appreciation of their just worth.

A peculiar condition has existed in this country quite favorable to such a result. This condition has two distinct phases: First, the nervous, driving temperament of the people; second, the small town community. The first necessarily required relaxation which could not so generally be had in other lines of sports. The last equally needed a spur, for there is little of excitement in small settlements, and again the game of billiards afforded a more universal relief.

Quite logically, then, it meant the dissemination of knowledge of the games. What was considered to be only for kings and the leisure class has turned

out to be just the thing for the medium and busy classes. It was democratizing billiards in the fullest sense, but it did not lose its attraction to those who have more time and money to give to it.

So, the evolution in the sport of billiards is the evolution in the adaptation of a pastime to the people's needs. It is a long stretch of time from Marc Antony to the present day, but what other variation in the lives of people has lived so long and still maintained its basic principle?

And the end? There seems none; for there are springing up here and there over the land tournaments at a style of play called three cushion; contests at pocket billiards, in cities and small places, that arouse interest without passions. It is a sort of inter-city rivalry.

The home—that is more important still. It has become a meeting place for the young in the evening, those from about the neighborhood, who gather and banter each other's prowess.

But not so much prowess as environment. It is a well established sociological proposition that the great difficulty with home life today is its lack of proper inducement, and thus environment to the boy and girl members. The moment the boy comes home from school doing possibly a few chores, he runs away to this and that place, where he can and does receive diversion. And what is worse, when night comes on he finds himself so completely without diverting influences, no doubt aided by the nervous temperament of the national life, that he is literally forced to seek them out.

So, applying the principle, parents are now remedying the difficulty by affording the diversion sought for—a diversion in many forms.

Billiards is one form—a manly, entertaining, educative diversion. It keeps the young at home, gives them the stimulus toward upbuilding, and thus strengthening the moral forces of their nature.

Municipalities—they recognize the character building influence of the game by establishing municipal billiard halls where those who cannot afford to pay may enjoy the game under competent instructors.

The evolution in the pastime of billiards is another step in the extension of the moral element of the American people. The sport may still claim the support of all right thinking and right living citizens.

BILLIARDS IN THE MODERN HOME

